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## THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

*Sermon by Rev. James I. Vance, D. D., Retiring Moderator, Preached at Opening of Assembly*

### "Can the Church Build the New World?"

"Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit." John 12:24.

By death he does not mean stagnation nor extinction nor oblivion. He means surrender and sacrifice and service and the immortality which builds itself out of such graves into a glory that is fadeless and a life that is eternal. "Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit."

It is nature's law. Not a blade of grass leaps from the sod in the springtime but must first obey this law. Not a flower lifts its face toward the sun but does it from a grave. Not a harvest field billows from green to gold across the wide plains but marches over places where slain life sleeps. Not a tree stands up in the forest, not a vine climbs a wall or wraps its tendrils around a trellis, but started on its way by kissing the face of death. It is nature's law and its application is as wide as God's world.

It is also a law of grace. Jesus lifts it from the flower gardens and the farm fields, from the forests and the meadows, and enacts it into the code of the spirit. It is one of the natural laws in the spiritual world. It reveals the soul's trail to God. No man can find life without tasting death, can achieve victory without experiencing surrender, can climb up without first climbing down. Humiliation precedes exaltation. The cross anticipates the crown. Self-effacement must supplant self-glorification. Death must build the road for life.

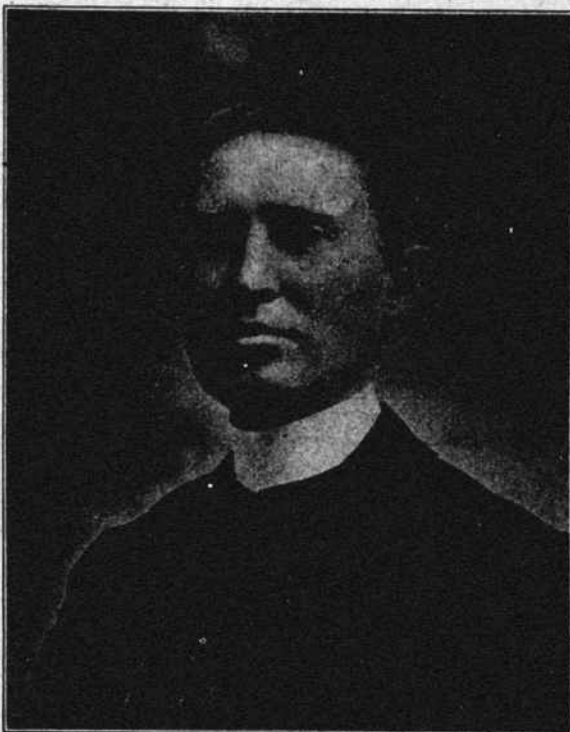
This means that service is a bigger thing than salvation; that salvation is a by-product of service; that the business of a Christian is not so much to get to heaven as to do the will of God. It was this Paul meant when he said, "I could wish myself accursed for my brethren." The salvation which would take him to heaven and leave his brethren in hell could never satisfy him. He would rather go to hell himself than have his people there.

Christ indicates the cloister idea of sainthood which substitutes a spiritual boudoir for a street of service and self repression and repose for sacrificial suffering. Christ sought the sepulchre not as a couch of repose, not as an escape from the world, but as a place from which he would rise into life, into a ministry of undying service and ceaseless intercession for mankind. And he who would know God must efface himself and first kiss the face of death.

It is the law to whose demands the world's Redeemer yielded. Jesus never asked men to do what he has not done. He was a great preacher. He preached death and he died; he talked of the cross and he lived in its shadow

and stumbled down the broken road with its heavy beam cutting into his tired flesh and climbed the hill to where its gaunt arms waited to claim him as their victim. Christ had his calvary and so he can preach it; he effaced himself. There in the garden, he said, "Not my will but thine be done." Yonder on the cross he cried, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit." He was wrapped in the bands of death and laid in Joseph's tomb. Jesus comes to us from a grave and so can say, "Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth alone."

Shall we stop here with this law? It is the law to which Christ himself conformed; it is nature's law, and its application is as wide as God's world; it is the law for the individual



Rev. James I. Vance, D. D., Retiring Moderator. Christian. If he is to enjoy fellowship with God he must experience something of what Paul meant when he said, "I die daily."

### A Law for the Church.

Is it not also a law for the Church? If it be true that a grain of wheat must die before it can live, that a Christian must think more of serving than of getting served; that even Christ spared not himself but sought a cross, are we to conclude that his Church may repudiate all this for itself and imagine that it can live without dying? Is there one law for the individual Christian and another law when these individual Christians are gathered together into an organization? Are there obligations that are binding in a personal way but from which we are immune in an ecclesiastical way? While it was a holy thing for Paul to say, "I could wish myself accursed for my brethren." would it

be an impious thing for the Church to wish itself accursed for the sake of humanity? Is the salvation of the Church more important than the work it was sent to do? While Christ speaks of death to the individual Christian, are we to conclude that the Church is so holy, so self-sufficient, that he would never suggest that it would best die in order to live?

Is it not possible for good people to be hypnotized into the strange belief that the business of Christianity is to save the Church? That when the Church is prosperous, that when its statistics are fat and its pews filled, calvary has scored, and the pale sufferer who hung there and whose face was marred with anguish and whose heart was broken by the agony of his atonement, at last sees of the travail of his soul and is satisfied. Is not this to commit the same blunder about the Church that Germany made about the State? Germany regarded the nation as immune from those ethical obligations which are binding on the individual. Is it not possible to make the same fatal blunder in our theory of the Church? To conclude that there is one law for the church member and another law for the Church composed of these members, that while the individual is to serve by ministering, the Church is to serve by being ministered to?

### Two Conceptions of the Church.

There are two views of the Church. There are good people who worship the Church. They say their prayers to an organization. Their piety is ecclesiastical and their attitude to social problems is not what the Church can do for them but what they may do to the Church. Their opinion of any proposed change in ecclesiastical machinery, method or belief is determined by what they feel will be its effect on the Church. They are out to save the Church and they feel that when the Church is prosperous society should be satisfied. Such people are jealous of precedents, devoted to traditions, fond of statistics and bound by dogmas. Since their devotion to the Church is so acute, they feel that their loyalty to Christ should not be questioned.

There are others who look upon the Church as an instrument for work and worship. Its value is to be determined by its efficiency. Its business is to take from the hands of its crucified Lord the cause for which he gave his life and carry on. This it is to do in his spirit and with his disregard of personal safety and comfort. Its glory is not in the sacrifices it makes; not in the systems it defends but in the truth it proclaims; not in the perquisites it secures but in the service it renders.

This second view of the Church regards it not as the end of Christianity but as a means to an end. If the Church is doing anything that stands in the way of its efficiency as a